

June 27, 2005 - Testimony for BRAC Commission Regional Hearing

Thank you General Newton and thank you to Chairman Principi, General Turner, and my friend, **Commissioner Jim Bilbray**, for being here today. I want to convey my gratitude and thanks for your service on the BRAC Commission

I have represented the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station for the last 3 years and have become intimately familiar with the critical role that this base, and the brave men and women who serve here, play in ensuring the continued security of Western New York and the Northeast United States.

After carefully reviewing the Pentagon's assessment of the Air Base, I have concluded that the Air Force incorrectly evaluated the considerable homeland defense value of the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station.

Furthermore, it has become apparent that the Pentagon used flawed data and subjective methodology to place this base on its closure list.

I want to emphasize what Mr. DeWitt said a few minutes ago - Homeland Defense is our business at the Air Reserve Station.

Our base is responsible for emergency response and Combat Air patrols over large metropolitan areas, and key border crossings throughout the northeast and mid-west.

No other example could demonstrate the effectiveness and enormous strategic value of the Air Base as clearly as the tragic events of September 11th.

In the wake of the only foreign attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor, The 107th was the first Refueling Wing to fly Combat Air patrols over New York City.

This guard unit also played an instrumental role in the rescue and recovery operations that followed. In addition, a specialized unit of the 914th, trained in identifying and preparing the remains of disaster victims, was extensively utilized in the 9/11 recovery mission.

Even today, no other base in the region is capable of responding as quickly and effectively in the event of another terrorist attack or disaster.

Since 9/11, the 914th has provided one, three, and twelve-hour response alert aircraft and crews to support homeland defense response plans.

In fact, the Air Reserve Station is the ONLY staging area in Western New York for homeland defense and disaster response.

The importance of the base's proximity to 6 northern border crossings, the New York Power Authority, and the largest metropolitan area in the country must not be undervalued....Especially when we consider that the northeast region of the United States continues to be a primary target of those who wish to do us harm.

For example, the base's Fire and HAZMAT teams have had to respond to three threats at our binational bridges within the last ninety days alone .

Additionally, several Homeland Security agencies train personnel and house equipment at the base,

For instance, the Coast Guard has regularly utilized the Air Base facilities and resources as a staging area for their air patrol of the Great Lakes. And in 2002, the installation supported the deployment of Army Guard helicopters assigned to support the U.S. border patrol.

Closure would eliminate these joint-use advantages, leaving the region more vulnerable to future attacks and rendering us unable to respond to natural or man-made disasters.

Closing the Air Reserve Station would also accelerate a troubling pattern of military withdrawal from the Northeast.

Since 1987, the number of Reserve and National Guard forces stationed in the region has fallen by roughly 37 percent, compared to 21 percent in the rest of the country.

Home to over 20 percent of the nation's population, the Northeast accounts for less than 8 percent of the military's forces. Yet under the Pentagon's plan, our region's Combat Air Patrol would be reduced by more than 50 percent.

To make even further cuts, as the Pentagon has proposed, in my view and in the view of many experts, would be foolhardy and could yield disastrous results for our homeland defense and security.

I fear that in ten years we will regret consolidating the bulk of our strategic military resources in the South, at the expense of homeland defense in the Northeast. And we will have no choice but to revisit this very issue, and re-establish bases we've closed at a staggering cost to American taxpayers -- one that will far exceed any perceived savings from this closure process today.

Have we forgotten the painful lessons of Pearl Harbor? We just can't put everything in one place, or even in one region of the country. While force consolidation may be attractive on a balance sheet, history has shown us that it is not a formula for a successful military defense strategy.

But perhaps what is most troubling evidence is that the Pentagon used flawed data and an evaluation process that was subjective rather than objective.

Why did the Pentagon establish criteria for evaluating an installation's military value, only then to ignore their own analysis?

As I am sure the Commission has repeatedly been made aware, the military value of the Base was ranked higher than a handful of other bases with similar missions around the country...and which are slated to remain open or be expanded. The Air Force also grossly exaggerated the cost-savings of closing the base.

And to my knowledge, the Air Base's strategic proximity to our Northern Border was not even taken into account when the military value criteria were developed.

We as a nation cannot afford to reorganize our entire strategic military infrastructure based on outdated criteria, incorrect data and supposedly objective methodologies that were clearly not adhered to.

It appears that the base was placed on the closure list as late as January because of a desire by the Air Force to poach superior planes and equipment from the Reserve components, without regard to the devastating impact on homeland defense and security in this region of the country.

It is what amounts to an ill advised "plane grab"... nothing more.

As the Commission finalizes their own closure list, I ask that you acknowledge the importance of a strong military presence in all regions of the country. In this age of unconventional threats, I also request you to consider the Air Reserve Station's valuable role in protecting the northern border.

Thank you for being with us here today and thanks you for your service to this great nation.